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Stewardship Values in Tourism, Innovation and UNESCO World Heritage Governance:

The Great Barrier Reef and the Danish Wadden Sea

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Introduction

The 2017 United Nations International Year of Sustainable Tourism recognises tourism's important role in contributing to progress along the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Of the 17 Goals 14 and 15, in particular, relate to the conservation of marine and terrestrial ecosystems. The role of tourism can be a symbiotic one where tourism development creates incentives for biodiversity protection and nature conservation, which in turn enhances the tourist experience.

The primary motivation for this research is to understand how conservation values held by those involved in tourism can provide a corrective against unsustainable growth and potentially embrace sustainable innovation at two UNESCO World Heritage sites, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Wadden Sea in Denmark. This paper addresses the significant need to understand the complex values and latent opportunities for sustainable tourism innovations through World Heritage stewardship.

There are currently 203 natural World Heritage sites in the world. The GBR was one of the earliest natural World Heritage areas listed in 1981. The GBR attracts over 2.2 million international and 1.7 million domestic visitors annually (Tourism Research Australia, 2015), generating economic benefits for Australia of AU\$6.4 billion (Deloitte Access Economics, 2013). As for the rest of

Australia, a shift from traditional Western markets to Asian visitors can be observed. The WS in Denmark is a recently nominated natural World Heritage site. The Wadden Sea spans the coastline of three countries – Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. In 2014, the Danish part of the Wadden Sea followed the Dutch and German World Heritage inscription in 2009. Approximately 10 million tourists visit the trilateral Wadden Sea area, in addition to 30-40 million day visitors, who generate a yearly turnover of 5 billion Euros (Marencic & Domnick, 2014: 6).

Values and stewardship

A values-framework based on the International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN] Protected Area categories (Liburd & Becken, 2017) is applied to examine how values guide stewardship in the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) and the Wadden Sea (WS) in Denmark. Values play an important role as they likely determine priorities and actions by those involved in management, governance or stewardship. Values represent internal moral imperatives that implicitly or explicitly guide action (Oyserman, 2001). It is important to anticipate that dominant values can change over time (Becken, 2016) and to account for these through analysis of longitudinal, complex system adaptation (Morrison, 2017). Dominating value systems may also differ across cultures and societies. Tourism as a platform for exchange amongst different cultures (including the hosts and the guests) represents a possible change agent of influential values that Protected Area stewards may face.

In particular, recent significant growth in outbound Chinese tourism has led to a changing customer base that may demand different products and experience and interpret the human-environment relationship differently from traditional Western markets. Indeed, the recent emphasis of eco-civilisation, building on the traditional concept of harmony, in the Chinese Government and society may provide impetus to changes in how Protected Areas embrace and commodify nature for tourism purposes. There is limited understanding, however, whether the Chinese Dream of travel and the development of societies that are compatible with environmental carrying capacities can positively affect Protected Areas, or whether increased visitation pressures and consumptive tourist activities by Chinese visitors erode ecosystem integrity.

The role of values is central to World Heritage sites because they are based on the concept of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) (UNESCO, 1972). Whilst many values are often local or national, the concept of universal values is relevant to all of human kind, including visitors from around the world. The OUV of World Heritage sites is firmly embedded in China, which itself has 15 natural World Heritage sites, and is planning to designate more in the future. The relevance of understanding OUV is critical for the ongoing existence of World Heritage sites in the day-to-day *realpolitik* of governance. Site managers are responsible for daily governance, often in collaboration with local and national stakeholders. Intervention from UNESCO in Paris representing the universal values is limited, albeit potentially powerful. The IUCN and UNESCO enjoy a longstanding trajectory that includes co-drafting of the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the IUCN is explicitly recognised within the Convention as the technical Advisory Body on nature to the World Heritage Committee (IUCN, 2016a). Thus, attaching values of nature to the IUCN categories aligns well with the philosophy that underpins conservation and the OUV of World Heritage sites (Liburd

& Becken, 2017). Changing mainstream ideologies and political commitment to utilitarian growth can erode the OUVs and the sustainable development of tourism in UNESCO World Heritage sites. The pressure for growth and shifts in dominating market segments may recalibrate values – including the universal values on which World Heritage sites depend – towards more utilitarian tenets.

We argue, however, that the well-established dilemma between nature conservation and growth can be constructively approached by stewards who care beyond selfish interests. Stewardship differs from stakeholder and agency theories, both of which find their justification in self-preservation, economic motives and a pragmatist, rational approach to management (Donaldson & Davis, 1991; Freeman, Wicks, & Pamar, 2004; Bernstein, Buse, & Bilimoiira, 2016). Stakeholder and agency theories have a strong individualistic focus, which can jeopardize larger environmental and societal good. Stewardship theory does not reject individual motivations, but suggests that those involved gain benefit by putting the interests of others above their own and pursuing actions that generate their own intrinsic rewards (Neubaum, 2013). Neubaum (2013) defines stewardship as “caring and loyal devotion to an organization, institution, or social group” (p. 2). The concept of stewardship is relevant in understanding values – and resulting actions – in the context of nature conservation in World Heritage areas. We discuss how the values framework presented here could be a powerful tool for stewards involved in conservation and innovation for sustainable tourism development to remind those who merely manage and govern of the original nature-focused values.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to allow for underpinning values to emerge and reduce the risk of being prescriptive. The relativist ontology underpinning the work assumes that reality is socially constructed, even if particular elements of this reality (e.g. the environmental qualities of the GBR and the WS) are measurable by objective approaches.

The first stage of data collection for this research was conducted between December 2014 and March 2015 in Australia. Leading tourism representatives involved in the GBR were identified and contacted for an in-depth interview. The GBR Marine Park Authority’s Tourism Reef Advisory Committee was used to identify key individuals. Further interviewees emerged using snowball sampling from recommendations provided by the key stakeholders first interviewed. This process also brought in managers involved in GBR governance, which resulted in 13 in-depth interviews, each ranging from between 30 and 120 minutes. Whilst this is a relatively small number it is important to note that the interviewees were leaders in their field (typically Chief Executive Officers) who collectively had accumulated considerable expertise and longitudinal experience (Liburd & Becken, 2017).

The second stage took place between January 2016 and May 2017 where a total of 12 in-depth interviews with key tourism operators, public sector managers and other stakeholders from the Danish Wadden Sea National Park and WS UNESCO World Heritage Site were collected. Similar to the GBR interviews, the duration of interviews ranged from 30 and 120 minutes. In addition,

three tourism co-design workshops were held in 2016 and 2017 in the Danish WS to engage tourism practitioners, researchers, post-graduate tourism students, the public sectors at municipal, regional and national levels in innovation and sustainable development processes.

Tourism co-design is a co-generative and co-learning development endeavour that leverages the communicative interaction between people (Heape, 2007; Mattelmäki & Visser, 2011; Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Liburd, Nielsen & Heape, 2017) and enable people to change their practices. The tourism co-design workshops were video recorded following consent of all participants and lasted three to four hours each. Video protocols were transcribed verbatim, as were all of the 25 in-depth interviews. Interviews were coded for emergent themes using content analysis, a commonly employed tool that is useful for uncovering knowledge and new insights from the participants' perspective (Jennings, 2010: 211-213).

Interviews and tourism co-design materials were complemented by longitudinal participant observation and action research. Action research generally relates to research that is connected to a change process, for example by the researcher working closely with stakeholders who are guided by the research findings to adjust decision making (Munch, 2014). The first mentioned author serves as appointed Chair of the Wadden Sea National Park Board in Denmark (since January 2015). The second mentioned author served on the State of Queensland's Ministerial Taskforce on GBR Water Quality from May 2015 until June 2016. The Taskforce provided advice and recommendations to the Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection and Minister for National Parks and the Great Barrier Reef and the Queensland Government on issues related to water quality targets, management strategies and programs, investment priorities, and monitoring activities.

Findings

The researchers' engagement with the GBR and WS over several years, and the insights gained from the interviews and workshops, helped identify changes in value perceptions of the GBR and WS governance, and moreover, to identify latent opportunities for stewardship, conservation and innovation for the sustainable development of tourism in the two World Heritage sites.

Our analysis demonstrates the importance of a dynamic and holistic understanding of World Heritage stewardship, which lies beyond state governance and formal site management. The distinction between stewardship and governance as the act of governing has emerged as relevant in this research. Whilst Governance denotes a "conceptual and representational role of the state in the coordination of socio-economic systems" (Hall, 2011 p. 439), it was found that the in the GBR and WS, informal governance is exercised by stewards who care, display loyal devotion and identify with protection of the sites beyond own and state interests. The concept of stewardship thus puts emphasis on the people involved in conservation efforts, their values and dynamic interrelations. It is people who support the protection of nature, or not (Jones & Shaw, 2012).

Hitherto, the resilience and strategic importance of local stewards in World Heritage conservation, and their ability to engage in day-to-day governance have been neglected. In the GBR research, it became evident by identifying values of nature among tourism operators, why new stewardship

alliances emerged during a period of systemic crisis (Liburd & Becken, 2017). The crisis emerged in response to declining tourism numbers, a simultaneous mining boom with rapid port development, a change in Government, and ongoing deterioration of the Reef – all of which led to an intervention by UNESCO to assess potential listing as ‘in danger’. The GBR crisis re-emphasised the importance of the World Heritage listing to many stakeholders (and stewards), whereby the fundamental reason of the World Heritage designation (i.e. the OUV of the natural asset) gained prominence and the mere marketing or brand value was less influential. The brand value with the growing Chinese market was seen as questionable by several stakeholders, whereas the ‘purity’ of nature as a key tourism attribute for Chinese visitors was seen as essential.

In the WS, the tourism co-design processes enabled values to transpire at multiple levels and engendered unknown possibilities that inform how conservation and more sustainable tourism practices may be operationalised. Examples of innovations for sustainable tourism from the interviews and workshops include service and experience innovation, branding of local produce, new partnerships and collaboration, climate change mitigation, and emergent opportunities for enhancement of quality of life for senior residents and visitors alike (Liburd, Heape & Knudsen, 2017).

To illustrate the latter, and despite the fact that tourism has historically been used for health purposes, especially in natural environments (Bramwell, 2011; Bramwell & Lane, 2011), the current state of scientific knowledge on health outcomes and practice of how to encourage active or responsible ageing is deficient. Whilst there is some evidence that leisure and tourism can provide health benefits, there is little knowledge of how sustainable tourism development can be used as a tool to facilitate healthier ageing. Moreover, there is very limited exchange and integration of knowledge and skills between visitors and those engaged in conservation. This is in spite of potentially shared values of nature by residents and visitors to the Wadden Sea and the GBR, who may readily engage in stewardship and innovation in and beyond the UNESCO World Heritage Sites. An experiment of primary prevention for residents and visiting tourists through active, healthy ageing in the WS will be launched *primo* 2018, which is envisaged to generate new sustainable tourism opportunities while contributing to conservation of the OUVs in the World Heritage Site.

Conclusions

Findings from the two World Heritage sites point towards a more holistic approach to governance of World Heritage Site, including conservation, innovation and sustainable tourism development. This may emerge through recognition of the values held by stewards who devotedly care, beyond individualistic or commercial gain, while not excluding the latter.

Most of the identified opportunities for innovation and sustainable tourism development are still nascent and have not yet been applied to the wider industry or policy context, as they are subject to further, multi-disciplinary and international research. In particular, future research should examine in greater detail the common or differentiated values held by key market segments, including the

fast growing Chinese visitors. Explorations should also entail objective and subjective measures of well-being. Investigations of the need for new competences and new business models based on deep understanding of the values held by visitors to world class nature sites are needed. Finally, and as a result of our findings, our future research will be directed at further unpacking how tourism co-design can be used in order to more fully engage researchers, tourism operators, developers and tourists in nature interpretation and transformational learning processes focused on nature conservation and stewardship.

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